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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MADRID 000208

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FROM THE AMBASSADOR FOR SECRETARY GATES
DEPT FOR A/S DAN FRIED; NSC FOR JUDY ANSLEY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/05/2017

TAGS: MARR PGOV PREL SP

SUBJECT: SPAIN: ZAPATERO'S DECISION ON AFGHANISTAN FIRM

REF: MADRID 00197

Classified By: Ambassador Eduardo Aguirre for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d).

¶1. (C/NF) President Zapatero is highly unlikely to in the near term reverse his statement that Spain will not augment its troop presence in Afghanistan, thereby nixing the possibility of staffing the ISAF XI HQ in Kabul (with some 120-150 personnel). This conclusion stems from Ambassador Aguirre's conversations over the past several days with senior level Spanish officials, including Defense Minister Alonso and National Security advisor-equivalent Carles Casajuana. A response to a call to Foreign Minister Moratinos is pending.

¶2. (C/NF) In several conversations with Ambassador Aguirre, Defense Minister Alonso did not hide that he was despondent and clearly crestfallen that Zapatero had made this statement, which he made just one day after Alonso's comment in Afghanistan that the GOS was considering sending more troops. Alonso said that Zapatero's statement, which caught him completely by surprise, had been made it in such a way as to box the government in on the issue with little or no wiggle room, no political way to finesse a change of position, even a nuanced one. Alonso said he had gone back to Zapatero to try to get him to change his mind, but to no avail. (The UK Ambassador to Spain had also pressed GOS, and reported to the Ambassador that GOS had also expressed to him that Alonso had pressed the issue with Zapatero but with no results).

¶3. (C/NF) Alonso told the Ambassador that the reason for Zapatero's decision is based totally on domestic politics, and had nothing to do with NATO per se. The Ambassador noted that Spain was coming into an electoral season as regional/local elections loom in May and later in March 2008. Alonso acknowledged that we had a good understanding of the political scene here. Alonso hoped that this should not terminate the good defense relations between the US and Spain. The Ambassador told Alonso that we are well versed in the ups and downs of this relationship over the past several years and that we expect our high points, and then soon after, a low point. But this issue is critical to NATO and to the Allies fighting in Afghanistan and calls into question Spain's commitment to NATO. Alonso insisted Spain remained committed to NATO; I said that failure to take the HQ component it is very serious.

¶4. (C/NF) The Ambassador called Zapatero's national security advisor Carles Casajuana to make clear Washington's and the Embassy's disappointment about the Zapatero decision.

Casajuana said he had had a conversation with NSC European Senior Director Judy Ansley a few days ago. Casajuana said that Zapatero had made the decision mostly for domestic political purposes and for some national security reasons. He said the GOS had sold the Spanish public on military participation in Afghanistan on the basis of its humanitarian, reconstruction and stability mission, and much less so as an aggressive military deployment. Casajuana said that as the military situation has become more difficult, this creates political problems in terms of public perceptions in a very heated Spanish political environment. An increase in the Spanish deployment - even to staff the ISAF HQ in Kabul - would be blown out of proportion by the opposition Popular Party, which has severely criticized the Zapatero government for any troop deployments, charging that Zapatero is hypocritical for having condemned Spanish deployments under the Aznar government, only to do so himself now that he is in power. At the same time, Casajuana said, from the national security/military strategy perspective, Spain fully supports the military imperative of NATO's current strategy, but is not willing to participate in an augmentation of Spanish troops. He said the GOS will invest in training Afghan security forces, which is very expensive, and remains fully committed to the Spanish deployments in Western Afghanistan.

¶ 5. (C/NF) Casajuana insisted that Spain wants a good relationship with the US and to have an excellent bilateral meeting between SecDef Gates and Defense Minister Alonso, and hopes for a successful Ministerial. Ambassador Aguirre repeated our concern and disappointment about the decision by President Zapatero not to meet Spain's commitment to staff the Kabul ISAF HQ. He further indicated that our public

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position to this turn of events was still under review. In the event that we underplay the seriousness of the situation in the media, Casajuana needed to understand that a reasoned reaction did not diminish our deep concern and disappointment.

¶ 6. (C/NF) In a pending call to Foreign Minister Moratinos, Ambassador Aguirre will make clear that Secretary Rice had understood Moratinos to say during their Jan. 25 meeting in Paris (on the margins of the Lebanon Donor's Conference) that Spain would meet its commitments in Afghanistan, and that Washington is very disappointed.

¶ 7. (C/NF) Embassy Comment: Zapatero's comments caught his entire team by surprise, including Alonso and Moratinos, the new MOD SYG for Policy Luis Cuesta, and MFA Political Director (number three-equivalent Dezcallar). Working with A/S Fried and USNATO Ambassador Nuland, who have also been in touch with senior Spanish officials, Embassy is examining next steps with the Spanish government, including our public stance. We want to avoid boxing Zapatero even more tightly into the corner he has constructed for himself, hoping against hope that at the NATO Defense Ministerial in Seville (or SecDef's Bilateral meeting with Alonso) we find some shred of hope that a way can be found for him to meet the ISAF commitment without increasing troop presence, or other formula to fix the problem or make up for it in a big way. At the same time, we don't want to let Zapatero off the hook on something so important to the Alliance and Spain's commitment to it. Alonso, who has actively sought good relations with the US and found ways to advance that interest, will be receptive to SecDef's arguments on the subject, but he has been undercut publicly by President Zapatero despite their long friendship and close ties.
Aguirre